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Spring 2015

Capitalizing on Distinctiveness: Creating WV for a New Economy

Brian A Hoey, *Marshall University*



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CAPITALIZING ON DISTINCTIVENESS: CREATING WEST VIRGINIA FOR A "NEW ECONOMY"

BY BRIAN HOEY

This paper explores use of images and ideas of place to promote particular social and economic agendas within the regional context of Appalachia. Despite prevailing imageries of backwardness and isolation that adhere to the region, as well as recent history of often-bleak economic conditions, communities such as Huntington, West Virginia, are ideal places to observe inventive forms of community-building, place-making, and place-marketing that borrow from emerging cultural and economic models and stand in sharp contrast to a once-dominant paradigm that encouraged capital investment by relying simply on tax breaks and the provision of cheap land and labor to attract large, typically industrial employers. This research examines efforts of local activists and others who simultaneously embrace and reject elements of long-standing characterizations of place and people of Appalachia in their attempts to creatively redefine the meaning and purpose of development in West Virginia. Employing a critical regionalism, this article contributes to interdisciplinary literatures of Appalachian studies as well as postindustrial economic restructuring through deepening our understanding of how components of variously competing and sympathetic discourses concerning Appalachia have practical consequences for building community and fostering economic development in the region in what many now call the "new economy."

In this article, I first explore place-making and place-marketing through examining cultural construction of Appalachia as a distinct region. I then consider how Appalachian studies intersect the work of scholars interested in postindustrial economic restructuring and its consequences for economic growth and community development. I document work of activists and others attempting to redefine sources and meaning of economic growth in West Virginia.¹ Based in Huntington, West Virginia, I follow local efforts to establish a purposeful narrative of place through such groups as Create Huntington—an organization that grew out of coordinated efforts of

residents, Marshall University, and the mayor's office. Beginning in 2006, this forward-looking citizen-based organization, which received charitable 501(c)(3) non-profit status in early 2010, has worked to facilitate development of a "vision for progress" among community members and to apply these ideas within the city of Huntington and surrounding area. As stated in a 2009 interview with the author, Thomas McChesney, founding organization board member who grew up in the area, Create Huntington exists "to provide the structure to enable *creatives* to do what they think is important, not to tell them what is important—that is something that has become a competitive disadvantage for the area because for too long people here have been told what they should think and what is important" (personal communication, June 2009).

Individual and collective efforts of these activists simultaneously reject and embrace narratives of place that emphasize distinctiveness of Appalachia. This strategy entails ambivalent relationships to stereotypes traditionally representing the region as home to an "other" seen as unfortunate and "backward" or as a noble relic of our national past. While those at the forefront of making progressive, grassroots changes to long-standing ways of doing business in the community challenge negative images related to themes rooted in narratives of historical isolation, they may perpetuate equally essentialized characterizations of place that portray the community as attractive and distinct because of its very "otherness" in comparison to what is taken as "mainstream" modern America. This position exemplifies what I will show is recurring tension between dichotomous characterizations and interests that adhere to them. Writing of what I would describe as "lifestyle migration," that is, relocation for essentially non-economic reasons, sociologist John Stephenson (1984) describes a basic irony that it's the "very *image* of remoteness and backwardness, coupled with the *fact* of its accessibility, which provides an attractive ingredient of the 'Appalachia' sought by numerous eastern seaboard American urbanites" (187; emphasis in the original).

Efforts of activists illustrate challenges to place-based identity and tensions inherent to prevailing economic discourse where particular places—personally meaningful to people who live and work in them—are regarded as little more than alienable commodities to be marketed and consumed much as any good. In the neoliberal economic landscape that emerged at the end of the twentieth century, geographers Chris Philo and Gary Kearns (1993) find that places are treated "not so much as foci of attachment and concern [for persons], but as bundles of social and economic opportunity competing against one another in open market for a share of the capital investment cake" (18). In this market discourse, places are treated as a good "that can be rendered attractive, advertised, and marketed much as

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capitalists would any product" (18). I take seriously a need to appreciate constituents of a discourse of place-making and place-marketing and the significance these discursive practices have for different social actors (e.g., see Hoey 2010).

Placing Appalachia through a Critical Regionalism

Anthropologist Setha Low (1994) states simply that "place is space made culturally meaningful" (66). This entails place-making. As I attempt to delineate not only the ideological but also geographic scope of our consideration, my thinking about borders and boundaries in lived experience of what Low defines as space rendered meaningful within a given cultural milieu is at least in part inspired by the work of folklorist Kent Ryden (1993). In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, Ryden discusses how physical geography and human landscape come to be recognized as distinct regions defined both from outside and from within. In his understanding, such regions may or may not correspond with visible geographic features or conventional political divisions.

Though with some deliberation—as must be expected with any attempt to draw lines arbitrarily through both land and lives—the perhaps most commonly used contemporary definition of "Appalachia," and one largely limited to geographic and economic dimensions, was provided by the passage of the Appalachian Redevelopment Act in 1965. When applied to this wide-ranging collection of some four hundred counties across thirteen states, Douglas Powell (2007) suggests in his interpretation of "critical regionalism" that we think of Appalachia as a "container" for a tangled, temperamental history. Born of critique within the field of architecture concerning potential for "placelessness" in modernist international design, critical regionalism was an attempt to reconcile tension between a conceivably homogenizing global context of contemporary life and possibly parochial local, vernacular forms and practices.

In the spirit of Powell's recommendation for *critical* regionalism within cultural studies, I attempt to treat West Virginia—the only state wholly within this regional container—not as a found thing but as an ongoing cultural construction. Such an approach is suggested by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2000; cf. Reid and Taylor 2002), who advocates shifting from trait-based ideas of culture areas—once common to anthropological literature—to conceptualizing more de-centered "process geographies."

Evoking "region" to describe or define places and people geographically situated within their supposed boundaries is necessarily purposive—even intentionally persuasive. To what ends is the term employed, and in whose interest? I employ reference to region here not to set this place apart as unique, but rather to consider a set of relationships among different,

potentially distant geographic locations. I attempt to reconcile—or at least come to terms with—tension between different levels of context. My intent is to emphasize region as necessarily relational and intermediate between local and larger social systems; structures of political, economic, and other forms of power; and patterns of meaning. My examination of efforts to make and market place by people in Huntington—who live and work within an economic order that demands place-based economic competitiveness on a grand scale—shows how these are not abstract, scholarly concerns. This is what people and places now must do. The contemporary imperative—fraught with tension of seeming incompatibilities—is to simultaneously merge with larger global networks while managing to retain unique qualities that mark (or perhaps "brand") a person or place, and somehow provide real or perceived advantage over others (Hoey 2010; 2014a).

West Virginia may be suitably described as liminal and serve as an illustration of the relational and intermediate position to which I refer above. A product of anthropological attempts to understand foundational rituals of culture such as rites of passage, liminality may be thought of as unstable or transitional social space with fluctuation between different—in this context interpreted as both earlier and newly emergent—ways of doing and understanding things. In different cultural groups, such rites serve to symbolically transform persons by shifting them from one social role to another. Thinking of West Virginia within this conceptual framework allows me to embrace Appadurai's suggestion to focus on process rather than an essentialized "culture area" view of a place and people who inhabit this place who are very much made "other."

West Virginia sits just south of the fabled Mason-Dixon Line, which despite relatively mundane origins in territorial disputes between colonial era state entities, became a symbolic division, rough cultural boundary, and assumed ideological watershed. Where West Virginia should be placed is not entirely clear in popular imagination. This uncertainty is an important beginning. Arguably, most Americans don't know where to place it—either physically or symbolically. West Virginians themselves appear willing to embrace a split mantle of "Northernmost Southern State" and "Southernmost Northern State," despite uncertainties of being at such a cultural intersection, a thematic threshold.

Critically Locating West Virginia

While continuing to examine place-making, I provide historical context for considering development challenges facing communities in West Virginia such as Huntington—shared challenges faced by many communities elsewhere. As suggested by anthropologist Allen Batteau (1990), West Virginia is not unique as a place—even while its particular story allows me

to bring experiences shared with other places (where they may be comparatively hidden) into sharp relief. It's certainly not unique in how it is marked by the successive passage of geological and historical ages, leaving a weatherworn palimpsest in which we may read the sweep of natural forces and decipher intent of past human action. It is exceptional, however, in the depth to which it has been both literally and figuratively inscribed, indeed scoured, through impersonal forces as well as varied human actions driven by some of the last century's most profoundly important and competing ideologies. The state's mountains, hills, valleys, and flatlands, birthed in the national nightmare of civil war itself born in a geography of violently opposed principles, bear traces of varied projects and philosophies. These range from chronically divergent paths of industrialization and environmental protection, modernization's faith in "progress" and oft-idealized pasts of "heritage" conservation, to many imaginaries behind a vast range of social, even utopian, twentieth-century experiments from New Deal era intentional communities to New Age communes (cf. Eller 2008; Hicks 2001; Whisnant 1983). Such tension may be one expression of being—as place—at the crossroads of liminality.

As asserted by Jeff Biggers (2006, xv), who dispels exoticized characterizations of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century color writers while invoking their most notorious author in Will Wallace Harney: "Far from being a 'strange land with peculiar people,' the mountains and hills have been stage for some of the most quintessential and daring American experiences of innovation, rebellion, and social change." One need not search long before finding evidence of the role played by West Virginia and the region as performative stage for acting out—or at least practicing—sometimes conflicting doctrines of wide-ranging ideologies. For example, speaking in early 1969 to the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers Systems, Man, and Cybernetics Society (IEEE SMC) in Washington, DC, shortly after Congress established the Appalachian Regional Commission, its first director Ralph Widner clearly conveyed the sentiment that "Appalachia is something of a *laboratory* in which a new set of political, social, and economic principles is being tested" (quoted in Eller 2008, 185; emphasis added).

Having long played a part in the railroad industry, in natural resource extraction, and sometimes in violent struggles of labor—including the largest armed confrontation in US labor history at Blair Mountain in 1921—West Virginia also stands at the Rust Belt's fuzzy edge. States like my former home and research site of Michigan—the prominent, though tarnished, buckle on this heavily frayed belt—have thrashed publicly in their economic and population decline, leading even to coining such terms as "Michigration" to describe the impact of deindustrialization and declining opportunity on

job markets and population numbers (Hoey 2014b). West Virginia, too, has suffered high out-migration during the twentieth century's second half (see Borman and Obermiller 1994). This emigration proceeds as young people abandon the industries of their forebears that once defined entire communities—whether these places were the "company towns" of coal companies or not.

Place-Marketing in the "New" Economy

Despite a recent history of often-bleak economic conditions, I look to places like Huntington as ideal sites for examining forms of entrepreneurship, community-building, and place-making and place-marketing that appear responsive to emerging models. Huntington is a community—like others in areas hard hit by economic restructuring—doing some collective soul-searching. Who are we today if we were once something quite different before? How did we get here? What's next? These are questions that appear to come from being in a liminal, unstable social space—caught between known realities of industrialization, the aftermath of deindustrialization, and an uncertain economic future.

One of the last large industries in Huntington, Owens-Illinois closed its glass plant in 1993 and took with it a staggering 630 mostly well-paying jobs—increasing the city's unemployment rolls by a third. The community was emotionally devastated. It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Being passive before such loss—really abandonment—was no longer an option. Desire of residents to prevent further degradation of local conditions was clearly evident in actions that followed. In an attempt to take control of what appeared to be a downward spiral, an emergency town meeting was held. Nearly one thousand people gathered to discuss ways to stem job loss and, increasingly, population decline. Over several months, residents completed a strategic plan guided by three general principles: economic opportunity, sustainable development, and fostering community-based partnerships. Although at least ten years would pass before the substance of this vision would yield lasting results that promised to transform Huntington both physically and conceptually, the movement—dubbed "Our Jobs, Our Children, Our Future" based on a twelve-page special section in the local newspaper—planted a vital seed for thinking about and doing things differently.

Founded as a key terminal on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in the 1870s, Huntington was forged in heavy industry. Since reaching its mid-twentieth-century peak, the city's population has been halved by out-migration. Of its nearly fifty thousand residents, roughly 25 percent live in federally defined poverty, according to Census figures. Adding insult to years of injurious deindustrialization, Huntington was named

Figure 1: Buildings on the grounds of the former Owens-Illinois Glass Plant redeveloped in the 1990s through efforts of the Huntington Area Development Council and the City of Huntington. Photo credit: Brian A. Hoey.



"Unhealthiest City in America" in popular press headlines based on findings of a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey that found Huntington led in rates of obesity and a dozen other illness measures, including heart disease and diabetes (see Stobbe 2008). The study also found half the elderly population without their natural teeth. This was a fact almost gleefully propagated by national media in what seemed a means of reinforcing prevailing stereotypes of toothless "hillbillies."

News of Huntington's dismal health statistics attracted the attention not only of a raft of reporters but also celebrity "Naked Chef" Jamie Oliver, who targeted Huntington as the site for his reality TV show, "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution," which featured theatrical attempts to get what were often presented as hapless locals to eat and behave in more healthy ways. Though not naked himself, Oliver is known for his flamboyant style and unapologetic commitment to food being prepared in an unadorned

fashion. The claim that Huntington was the unhealthiest city allowed this place and its people to serve as the perfect foil for Oliver to promote his "revolutionary" message about diet and lifestyle. The stage was set, cameras were now rolling, and a (would-be) groundbreaking experiment was—once again—taking place in Appalachia.

Against this dramatic (or at least dramatized) backdrop, grassroots efforts at increasing numbers of local activists stand at odds with a range of popular images of West Virginia as well as the industrial era's dominant order. The typical approach to encouraging capital and social investment relies on rolling back taxes and providing cheap land and labor to attract large employers—what many refer to as "smokestack chasing." Major industries hold great power in some places where they provide paychecks to a significant portion of the local population. This has been so for large swaths of West Virginia where industrial employers—primarily based in extraction of coal and other mineral resources—dominate local economies and politics. Sociologists Shannon Bell and Richard York (2010, 116) suggest that persistent public acquiescence to the needs and desires of industry—even with large-scale reductions in jobs coupled with long-standing, deleterious environmental and social impacts—is at least partly achieved by efforts of industry to "reconstruct a bond with communities they degrade, attempting to replace the employment connection between industry and community with a constructed ideology of dependency and economic identity."

As we see in smokestack chasing, communities all over America continue to hold beliefs and participate in practices productively compared to the "cargo cults" documented by cultural anthropologists in Pacific islands.² Often used as an example of "syncretism," a blending of different sets of cultural belief and practice, cargo cults in places like Vanuatu are the product of great upheaval among indigenous peoples of islands visited by US troops during World War II. Apparently awed by the seemingly supernatural abilities of soldiers to summon vast amounts of goods like food, clothing, medicine, and weapons as "cargo" from the sky through airdrops, some local people developed elaborate systems of belief and ritual practice—what have been termed cults—that mimicked elements of the military ideologies and behaviors of the servicemen they witnessed. Like these cargo cults, to what extent have local governments engaged in elaborate rituals borrowed from economic models provided by other, comparatively prosperous, communities who have exhibited an ability to summon the precious cargo of a large employer? In a limited, sometimes desperate, pitch, they see the problem of economic salvation as predominantly one requiring ritualized mimicry, where if only they can perform the same steps, they, too, will receive manna from economic heaven.

We glimpse such magical thinking at the community level in an excerpt from my recent interview with longtime Huntington city planner Charles Holley in December 2012:

We had been going along as a community through the 1950s with twice the population we have now. We were feeling pretty good about ourselves. We sat back. The city grew and the private sector drove it. Then all those [industrial] plants started to go away and everyone was like, "Come on, come on back." [laughs] It didn't happen! Then by about 1990, it was pretty clear they weren't coming back. They're *not* coming back. It was a slap—we've got to do something. And what is that? The city decided we were still all about manufacturing so it bought up the old plants and tried to redevelop those grounds. We spent close to ten million dollars and won the Phoenix Award for brownfield redevelopment. Still, it didn't work. The city felt it could make its own economic development. Build it and they will come. And we kept at it creating industrial parks without much success. Eventually, it was kind of a desperation move. (personal communication)

In opposition to this older, outdated approach to creating community growth and economic development, we have the non-governmental organization of Create Huntington. Beginning in 2006, when a group of forward-looking citizens and community leaders came together to discuss ways to address a host of local problems that many now associate with loss of former industrial employers, and to re-envision Huntington's economic future. Create Huntington has grown into a non-profit organization wholly dependent on volunteer service, grants, and donations, which works to support individual community members and groups in their efforts to improve the quality of life in Huntington. Among its organizational aims (their website no longer contains the following quotes) are to facilitate development and maintenance of a "community vision for progress" and to "shepherd citizen projects so progress toward shared vision is ongoing," while connecting people with resources and tools as well as individuals and groups essential to completing projects collaboratively and effectively. Most importantly, the organization's mission is to build what social scientists call "social capital" by strengthening webs of relationships among people who live and work in this place—creating connections enabling them to work together in order to raise the quality of life through more effective planning and successful completion of projects variously fulfilling development potentials.

Bruce Decker (2008), Huntington native and Director of Collective Impact, declares that "Huntington is in the midst of a ground-breaking transformation into a creative place full of possibilities, solutions, action, and

hope." Out of weekly community forums dubbed "Chat 'n' Chews," where interested community members self-organize to "get 'er done" nearly every Thursday evening in the lobby of a once-grand downtown Huntington hotel, an extraordinary array of projects have come to fruition in a few years' time, including community gardens, a downtown art gallery, a dog park, numerous small businesses, and several revitalized neighborhood organizations. As noted in literature for the recent "Create YOUR Huntington" drive:

The campaign is about changing the way we think about Huntington and our place in it. It's an acknowledgment that it's time to stop waiting for someone to save our city: a new industry, the government, you name it. They can't save us. It's up to us!³

Among early influences for founders of Create Huntington was the first—now annual—Create WV conference held in 2007. On the morning of my second day of attendance at the conference the following year at Snowshoe, West Virginia, Jeff James—as chairperson of the Creative Communities team of the public-private partnership, known as A Vision Shared, that initiated Create WV—welcomed 395 attendees from across the state and region with a report on the "State of the Creative Community" in West Virginia. James stated in his speech that "communities of West Virginia must take ownership in their destiny and embrace the new economy. Otherwise they'll end up *downstream* from where others are creating that destiny."

Through their actions, "creative" activists, like those who come to yearly Create WV conferences, challenge not only widespread perception of the region and residents as "backward," among other things, but also assumptions of literature on place and place-attachment. Especially for Appalachia, this has emphasized identity-defining connections of people to land based on idealized narratives testifying to continuity of familial residency, personal memories, detailed knowledge of the past, and intimate experience in the present. Virtually no attention is given to the importance of *future* visions as dimension in individual or collective sense of place.⁴ Place-making necessarily involves acts of both remembering and imagining. Place-image has real consequences for everyday life and well-being. It's the means through which what is imagined—whether out of fear or hope—can become real (Hoey 2010; 2014).

Reflecting on a shift in governmental strategy from something akin to smokestack chasing to something aligned more closely with the approach taken by Create Huntington, Charles Holley commented, in an interview with the author:

Today the city has learned its lesson. Now we work together with the private sector and local citizens. We do our part by changing

the environment—whether that be something as simple as traffic patterns or doing things to improve how people perceive the community. What can we do to attract people who want to live here? We are pursuing “green” initiatives and enhancing our amenities to make our city look more progressive. (personal communication, December 2012)

Indeed, this is an approach for which there is research-based support. As noted by geographer Alexander Vias (1999), in an emerging economic landscape based on principles of “flexibility,” jobs increasingly follow people. Given this, it’s important to focus on everyday people and their needs and wants in the community, and not just on the needs of potential employers. In addition to benefits imagined for existing residents, these efforts are a conscious attempt by activists and city government working with receptive local agencies including the local Convention and Visitors Bureau, to woo those who pursue lifestyle choices emphasizing a community’s quality of life or “livability.”

Looking at efforts of activists engaged with citizen projects originating through participation in what many have come to describe as the Create Huntington “movement,” which echoes the desire of its organizational founders to avoid conflicting with existing community organizations, provides the opportunity to examine popular efforts to critically redefine place both outwardly and inwardly. This redefinition proceeds through purposeful engagement with such late-capitalist trends as “smart growth” and “mixed-use” development seen expressed in the neo-traditionalism of “new urbanism” as well as in other prescriptive design approaches believed essential by advocates for “cultural creatives,” described by Richard Florida (2002) and others, to staking claim to place in the postindustrial landscape of an economy driven by competitive pressures born of neoliberal ideals.

New urbanism is a reformist design movement that emerged in 1980s community planning calling for “healthy neighborhoods” defined by walkable scale, open spaces for public recreation, a range of housing options and businesses, and a cultivated “sense of place” (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992; Calthorpe 1993). Indeed, new urbanist doctrine asserts that community can be purposively created to address social ills ranging from obesity to perceived decline in social capital (see Hoey 2007). While no doubt aimed at such wholesale developments as Disney Corporation’s planned community, Celebration, rather than urban “in-fill” projects such as Huntington’s decade-old downtown food, retail, and entertainment block known as Pullman Square—so named and architecturally themed as tribute to the city’s railroad heritage—critiques by academics and others question the ability to engineer something like community revitalization. Geographer

Figure 2: Located on a downtown block razed in the 1970s in anticipation of a downtown shopping mall, Pullman Square is described as a “lifestyle center” and is fashioned in neo-traditional style with architectural elements meant to evoke the city’s railroading heritage. Pullman opened in 2004. Photo credit: Brian A. Hoey.



David Harvey (1997), for example, stresses that new urbanism’s emphasis on creating community can appear oblivious to the “darker side” of its communitarian impulse, where prescribed institutionalized forms can impede conflict and creativity arising from expressions of diversity in favor of more comfortable parochialism. This returns me to an aspect of my original question of whether purposeful manipulation of representations of regional tradition—employed in service of economic development—can be problematic. My research in Indonesia provides a way to consider the issue.

“Tradition” in Development

Having spent years studying a population resettlement program in Indonesia known as “transmigration,” I find that my research in this developing Southeast Asian nation has unexpected relevance to my work in West

Virginia. Indonesia has long relied on extractive industries such as timber and mineral resources as a foundation to its economy, but there are other informative similarities. Anthropologist Michael Dove (1988) explains how what is perceived there as "old and unchanged, is reflexively categorized as undeveloped. Traditional cultures and lifeways are regarded as signs of underdevelopment and as formidable obstacles to necessary socioeconomic advancement" (1). This parallels the ideological position of many in charge of government programs aimed at "developing" Appalachia over the past century. As the United States matured into a global economic power following World War II, those responsible for spreading faith in technology and consumption-driven economic growth could not ignore the challenge to modernist narratives of progress and an affluent America provided by widespread poverty in Appalachia.

As Indonesia emerged from three centuries of colonialism as a newly independent nation following the war, Western-trained planners working with the government that came to embrace strident capitalist values—along with U.S. foreign aid—helped to create a worldview many in Indonesia have come to call *agama pembangunan*, which means "development religion" (see Hoey 2003). In accordance with de facto scriptures of this distinctly modernist faith, development planning has devalued, revised, or even eliminated long-treasured and practiced authentic, place-based cultural forms in favor of officially sanctioned and delimited forms meant to represent diversity at regional and national levels and to be used to promote economic growth by way of tourism. If we understand tradition as composed of historically deep, locally relevant practices expressing meaningful differences among groups—perhaps a measure of what Harvey (1997) described as forms of beneficial conflict that may spawn creativity—such practices have been largely omitted from this modernist form of development planning.

In such planning as I witnessed in Indonesia, tradition legitimated as this distinctly modern form was referred to as *tradisi*. Although the term is derived from the English "tradition," its use conveys a unique meaning in Indonesia while obtaining some cachet through association with the status of English-speaking countries in the global socio-economic order. While Bahasa Indonesia has several native ways to express the essential meaning of the English "tradition," *tradisi* is tactically invoked as a distinctly modernist symbol meant only to *imply* tradition.

A similar practice appears in Appalachia where something like *tradisi* is packaged for consumption by incorporating highly delineated aspects of the local or vernacular represented in controlled and restricted terms as an element or embellishment within official national narratives of regional heritage. That such a process has operated in efforts ranging from federal programs to missionary societies aiming to develop Appalachia has been

discussed as a form of "cultural intervention" by Whisnant (1983; cf. Becker 1998), who notes that preferred outsider visions of local culture as "craft," rationalized and standardized for commodity production, are at best selections, arrangements, or accommodations to preconceptions about a place and its people—about a region.

Working to Transform Liability into Commodity for Development

In answering the challenge to scholars of Appalachia made at least as early as Alan Banks, Dwight Billings, and Karen Tice (1993, 292) over twenty years ago, "to replace unitary notions of Appalachians and Appalachian identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity," we should seek to offer *senses* of place emergent in projects of local activists and detail how these may be at odds with popular definitions prevailing beyond the region (cf. Powell 2007, 14). In keeping with my earlier noted respect for critical regionalism and process geography, I speak not of a sense of place composed of essential qualities imparted by a singular history, set of practices, or a bounded, defined geography, but rather as potentially conflicting debate and discourse (like that defended by Harvey) variously competing and commingling around the *idea* of Huntington—indeed the entire state of West Virginia—and their position in an emerging economic order.

As recognized by Ronald Eller (2008), being at odds with stereotypical images can foster defensiveness that may serve as an important part of community-building. Emotional responses to popular stereotypes can positively or negatively affect behavior. Community reaction to the Associated Press report and subsequent media coverage leading to Jamie Oliver's choice to film an "unscripted" TV series in Huntington inspired defensive posturing—as was portrayed in the series to great narrative effect—as well as critical self-examination and subsequent initiatives to present Huntington in an alternative light. While there were already efforts to address food-related issues ranging from supply to diet and health, following Oliver's visit, local schools involved in the filming continued to use food preparation practices introduced during the show's taping. What was once "Jamie's Kitchen" is now "Huntington's Kitchen," first as a part of non-profit Ebenezer Medical Outreach and now the Cabell-Huntington Hospital. It continues to provide public education for healthy cooking and lifestyles as a community food center.

A year after the series ended, the food service director of Cabell County Schools, Rhonda McCoy, spoke to a sense that outside judgment had not ended, saying simply: "We're still under the spotlight. Everyone is still watching" (quoted in Rosenberger 2011). Beginning through community

discussions facilitated by Create Huntington, in 2012, the not-for-profit Wild Ramp opened in the old Baltimore and Ohio train station as a "local food hub" offering direct-from-producer goods to consumers. Wild Ramp has done so well that it moved to a bigger, city-owned space located in an area targeted for revitalization. The fruitful initiative to provide year-round access to local produce from small farms was a product of coordinated citizen action and community partnerships including Huntington's Kitchen as well as Marshall University students completing their senior capstone projects in my own department. The list of collaborators now includes the city itself, which is giving Wild Ramp its space for \$1/year for five years as the administration of recently elected mayor Steve Williams purposefully plants a seed for what is hoped will emerge not only as an even greater hub for regional produce but also renewed efforts to develop its long-neglected but promising Central City neighborhood.

In scholarly literature on Appalachia, much has been made of how popular, stereotyped characterizations of the region originated out of a

Figure 3: The non-profit, food hub "Wild Ramp" grew out of local efforts initiated through the Create Huntington Chat 'n' Chew community forums. Photo credit: Brian A. Hoey.



literature consisting in large part of narratives of exploration and discovery in travelogue, produced and consumed by an emerging urban middle class at the nineteenth century's end (e.g., see Ledford 1999; R. Lewis 1999; Shapiro 1978). Ronald Lewis (1998; 1999) suggests that Appalachia is a region without formal history, wholly conceived in the minds of local color writers bent on capitalizing on a literary-constructed exceptionalism. While helping to establish their own authority through firsthand encounters with an exotic other at home, they proclaimed distinctiveness in a people and place rooted in geographic isolation and deepened by cultural remoteness furthered by a wave of modernization seemingly unable to reach into the ancient mountains—much like past glaciation, which left these expanses intact. The region has thus been imagined as a pre-modern eddy in mainstream modern America (cf. R. Lewis 2004). As I noted earlier, evoking a region to collectively describe and define places and people is purposive, intentionally persuasive. This particular vision denies the inescapable fact that what many feel is the darkest heart of modernity has sunk itself deeply into the land of places like West Virginia as extractive industries that—while leaving behind spent lives and shattered landscapes—tend to fuel fires of growth and build mountains of wealth in other, far-flung places.

Elsewhere in the literature of Appalachian studies, much is said of an apparent historical "need" for Appalachia in constructing and maintaining a presumptive American national identity (e.g., see Donesky 1999; Eller 2008). Appalachia is again a foil—as Huntington served in Oliver's revolution—here counterpoint to the modernist narrative of progress. Appalachia has stood symbolically and ironically not only as a receptacle for dusky, inaccessible, and even shameful base elements of the American self—a kind of collective id—but also as a repository for heroic relics of our frontier past. Notably, both constructs, though disparate, emphasize the region's presumed distinctiveness.

In my work with local activists in Huntington, I observed in Chat 'n' Chew forums and elsewhere how local distinctiveness—colloquially referred to as "color" or what I define as local character—is taken as a necessary component in the intentional construction of sense(s) of place and most especially in the purposeful marketing of place to others and, in particular, with the cultural creatives seen as essential to initiating growth in departure from past smokestack chasing (see Hoey 2010). Avoiding direct engagement with questions of cultural stereotyping, certain assumptions about what it means to be in Appalachia are purposefully embraced. In particular, this place is envisioned as an alternative to the sprawling sameness of suburban America. For example, at the 2008 Create WV conference, I heard how Phoebe Patton Randolph, founding board member of Create Huntington and a local architect, asserted that a distinct advantage of West Virginia

compared to other places attempting to benefit from opportunities of a new economy is that the state "doesn't need to do a great deal of backtracking away from sprawl or problems with zoning such as 'use segregation.'" In this envisioning, today's comparative advantage is taken as product of the degree to which the state has been historically "out" of many potentially problematic planning and other public policy practices of mainstream America. Thus in a popularly acknowledged difference—including certain stereotypical understandings of being a "land apart" and even something primordial—many now seek to be a part of the area's future.

Anthropologist Rosemary Coombe explains that consumption of prevailing, sometimes global, representational forms can become a productive activity in which local people "engage in meaning-making to adapt signs, texts, and images to their own agendas" (1991, 1863). Ultimately, consumption of discourse is part of its ongoing production. Given that people can actively create—even through apparent perpetuation of certain stereotypical understandings and standardized representations of Appalachia—we must pay attention not only to the production of discourses on Appalachia, but also to their consumption and to how, perhaps unexpectedly and in small ways, this consumption may challenge dominant representations.

In apparent contribution to competing discourse to "development religion" concerned with the potentially pathogenic nature of modernity itself, value is being sought through what has otherwise been considered liability arising from the region's presumed isolation. In at least outwardly allied place-marketing efforts, in 2008, the state of West Virginia replaced border-crossing welcome signs that bore a much-maligned motto "Open for Business" with signs intended to offer itself (again) as a "Wild and Wonderful" antidote to the potential ills of modernity.

Following Governor Joe Manchin's 2006 State of the State address, "Open for Business" signs were reintroduced at major points of entry. Subsequently, a West Virginia University student petitioned to have them removed, and collected thousands of signatures and considerable publicity. Manchin eventually announced official call-in and Internet polls to settle the matter of whether the signs reflected popular sentiment. Results prompted the return of the slogan "Wild and Wonderful." Manchin was quick to note that "Open for Business" was never intended to replace "Wild and Wonderful." Rather, the shift in signage was designed to convey "changing attitudes" within the state to people living both within and outside (see Ryan 2006).

As evidenced by comments in response to news coverage in late 2007 and early 2008, for many self-proclaimed residents and others, "Open for Business" was an affront that—with some politically inflected imagination—conjured unseemly comparisons to prostitution. Commentators that

I observed on websites of the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* and *Charleston Gazette* newspapers went so far as to say that state government had invited a "raping" of its land, and consequently its people, by outside businesses. While language used by these public commentators varied from thinly veiled innuendo to sexually explicit and crass, sentiments conveyed in the comparison were akin to a self-defining narrative seemingly encouraged by the "internal colonialism" model applied in Appalachian studies over the past half-century. Beginning as early as Caudill's (1963) work, this model has characterized the region and its relationship with the broader US and global economies as well as its internal dynamics through the conceptual frame of colonialism. While problematic in its stereotypical understandings of local culture, Caudill's book provided narrative not only for scholars of Appalachia but also, indirectly, for many living in the region, to explain causes of persistent poverty. Most significantly, the model pointed to origins not in some character or even cultural "flaw" of local people—as might be provided for in the "culture of poverty" model based on work by Oscar Lewis (1959), or due to geographic isolation from the mainstream of American culture and the US economy—but rather in the exploitative nature of the region's *integration* with these domains.

Concluding Remarks

While historically West Virginia has been site of much (albeit not all homegrown) experimentation, today communities seem to labor under the weight of their collective past and economic and political arrangements to which leaders subscribed long ago. As someone instrumental in forming Create Huntington, Thomas McChesney suggested that the area is "extraordinarily risk averse and we've paid the price. It's like we've been putting our money under the mattress for decades" (personal communication, June 2009). If many in the community as well as city government are prepared to invest—in the sense that McChesney is broadly suggesting has not happened for a long time—in whom or what should they be investing? In proposing a "12-step recovery program" for communities long addicted to what she describes as a "non-functioning model of development" or what I referred to here as smokestack chasing, sociologist Helen Lewis (2007, 316) suggests that in Appalachia, "[w]e need a model which builds community rather than exploits and destroys it." In Huntington, the citizen-activists of whom I have spoken are now investing in creating capital—whether cultural, social, economic, or political—necessary to build community as the basis for economic development. This movement is very much in line with what anthropologist Susan Keefe (2009) describes as a "new paradigm" for development, or what is often called "participatory development." Importantly, Keefe asserts that this alternative approach "encourages

self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-development. It assumes power is not finite, residing only in the hands of power holders, but can also be created through participation in dialogue" (11). Create Huntington and so much of the progress made here has been born of such an empowering exchange of ideas among community members in the context of informal meetings and through impassioned deliberation such as what routinely takes place in the Chat 'n' Chew forums, which are intentionally focused on building collaboration to find creative solutions to frequently shared problems.

The self-described "vision planning" in which they have been earnestly engaged began in tension between past practice and future visions. While capitalizing on particular notions of distinctiveness, they attempt to define a place for Huntington in an emerging economic order that demands such creative redefinition by places all across the United States. Rejecting negative stereotypes while accepting what are taken to be advantageous elements of dichotomous characterizations that have long adhered to Appalachia as a region, they have stepped onto the stage to enact a new performance in keeping with a history of innovation within the region. The perception of isolation has been powerfully instrumental in shaping ideas and images of the region. Although on the one hand, it may be taken as a liability in that it can lead to "backward" as a label within the larger context of American society, acknowledging difference born in some measure of relative—perhaps even purposeful—separation from the "mainstream" may have created an opportunity for citizen-activists.

In heeding Jeff James's admonition to "embrace the new economy" and to create and act on a plan that challenges the status quo, the Create Huntington movement seeks to avoid ending up "downstream" from where others have historically taken ownership of the state's destiny through the force of physical and economic power and the privilege of social and political influence. In this effort, we can see how place and region may be defined from both "outside" and "inside." Unlike what has been suggested by limited "culture area" views of the past, by taking up the concept of process geography, we are encouraged to track flows of cultural expressions and social constructions as they take particular shape within local contexts to create much more variable regions than might otherwise be imagined.

As I described in the case of the emerging development religion within the context of Indonesia, representations understood as tradition in a peculiarly modernist way, and public policies ultimately based on them, may be employed to purposefully integrate the local into larger, national structures (in this case) while at the same time promoting economic growth—typically through what is marketed as "heritage" tourism. Thus these particular visions are purposefully limited in their function, stripped of what is considered negative or threatening, and serve only as what we can consider

"branding" in the United States within the largely corporate or, increasingly, place-based economic development context.

Just as it is for both everyday people and places in contemporary society, we are encouraged by the focus of a critical regionalism to acknowledge as scholars and (in our own way) attempt to reconcile tension between larger forces and local forms. For people and places, this is an enterprise fraught with risk. In the case of many communities of Appalachia, their plight of economic stagnation and out-migration does not result from isolation—of being "trapped" or even retreating into the familiarity of the local—but rather from their very integration into greater, increasingly global, flows. This history of integration, however, must be recognized as heretofore mediated by those "upstream," to continue James's metaphor, who have reserved that power for themselves. Today's grassroots citizen-activism in the city of Huntington, with the aid of governmental and non-governmental agencies at the local level, attempts to respond to imperatives of an emerging economic order that demands purposeful integration into a global market of places, while retaining local vernacular forms and practices that mark or brand this place and in some way provide real or perceived advantage over others.

Notes

1. Using ethnographic methods to describe and interpret belief and behavior through both fieldwork and artifact, my data collection began in late 2007. In the field, I use wide-ranging participant observation of everyday life enabled by my status as community resident and a shared social world with my participants. I collect data through public meetings of city government, neighborhood associations, and Create Huntington's Chat 'n' Chew forums as well as local and state conferences related to project themes such as Create WV. I draw on formal and informal, largely unstructured interviews with local activists—whom I define in this project as average people who commit to action they believe will improve the quality of life for themselves and others, members of Create Huntington and other local community organizations, and members of city government. I am interested in questions that elicit narratives revealing how people perceive relationships with local and broader social and cultural contexts as well as assumptions brought to decision making about how to personally and collectively engage with economic and other challenges to community development. Examination of cultural artifacts through interpretive textual analysis such as current and historical newspaper reports, public commentaries in online forums hosted by news sources, and official state and local websites and literature provides insight into symbolic expression and an impression of underlying values.

2. I have learned that sociologist Helen Lewis (2007) also made this comparison in consideration of community development in Appalachia.

3. Create Huntington's website (<http://www.createhuntington.org>) no longer includes quoted material that was taken from a version available and accessed in July 2013.

4. See Wagner (1999) for an exception.

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